Civil society need not speak English

Geiser, Urs

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[By Urs Geiser]

For good reason, one can no longer imagine debating development issues without the term "civil society" cropping up sooner or later. Along with state agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become key partners in both bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Involving civil society is meant to ensure that developmental measures meet people's needs – from the planning stage to implementation right through to follow-up programmes.

In Pakistan, for example, bilateral donors cooperate with civil-society organisations and sometimes create "tripartite arrangements", which also involve governmental institutions. The same is true of multilateral donors such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) or the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Donors hold workshops to negotiate with civil-society representatives, or to understand their views on current programmes. For example, the ADB invited various organisations to a conference in Islamabad: Action Aid Pakistan, LEAD Pakistan, the Aga Khan Foundation, the National Rural Support Programme, the Trust for Voluntary Organisations (TVO) and Khewendo Kor.
That the ADB is seeking contact with Pakistani civil society is a welcome move. But to what extent is Pakistan really present among the organisations listed above? Action Aid has its headquarters in Johannesburg. The Aga Kahn Foundation and LEAD are international actors. The National Rural Support Programme only exists due to a governmental initiative, and the TVO came about through the involvement of USAID, the aid agency of the USA. Only Khewendo Kor – an organisation tackling gender issues – is of authentic civil-society origin in Pakistan.

Matters tend to be similar at regional and local levels. For example, an ADB-supported programme

to reform the forestry sector in the North-West Frontier Province wanted to involve civil-society representatives as mediators between the state forestry department and the local people. But according to the programme's international experts, the civil society in that remote mountain region had not yet developed adequately. They could only identify a few groups suitable for their purposes. One of them was since discovered by other donors too, and has grown quickly as a result. A small association of voluntary teachers called Environmental Protection Society (EPS) thus became an organisation with permanent staff and an administration building.

Defining civil society

Donors would be more successful in their search for civil society if they took that task more seriously. Of course, social scientists work with different definitions of "civil society". Nonetheless, the following one by the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) in Sussex should be generally acceptable in the development arena: "An intermediate realm situated between state and household, populated by organised groups or associations which are separate from the state, enjoy some autonomy in relations with the state, and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests, values or identities."

Any researchers applying this definition to Pakistani mountain regions without looking immediately for suitable partners for specific projects, will quickly identify households. Families farm small plots of land, but that is rarely enough to make a living. Therefore, many men migrate to find work. The money they send home has growing significance for local livelihood strategies.

The search for the state is somewhat more difficult. As a concept, everyone is aware of the state in Pakistan. But how and by whom is the state represented locally? There are only a few schools in the villages, and the teachers are often absent. Medical facilities are also rare – and often in very poor condition. The governmental agriculture-extension officer looks after a huge area and only reaches a fraction of the farms. There are offices for the administration of identity cards, land registers or legal matters in the region's towns, but access to these offices is often difficult.

Accordingly, the social space between households and the state must be extensive and significant. Upon closer examination, researchers will indeed find many organised groups or associations. Assemblies of elders (jirgas) are an important example. If local conflicts between households or even between fractions of the village flare up, men in positions of influence sit together, in order to come

up with a solution, based on traditional rules and standards. The ancient concept of reciprocal support (ashar) is also worth mentioning. Its terms are often negotiated at the mosque on Fridays. However, there are also professional or special-interest groups which transcend village borders in their attempts to protect or extend their interests, values or identities.

There is a sawmill owners' association, for instance. Timber is an important commodity and processing it creates revenue and jobs. The national forestry regulations are strict, so only a few sawmills have an official licence. But there is a great demand for timber, and many more businesses are active in this sector. The owners of these operations have organised, in order to lobby the government. In strictly legal terms, however, they and their association are illegal.

The sawmill owners have already formed alliances with other groups, even including political parties. Peaceful rallies were held, which landed the organisers in jail for a few days. The international donor community, however, did not take notice. It does not cooperate with "criminals". But of course, the sawmill owners in the mountains play a more important role for the future of regional forestry than any international NGO with an office in Islamabad.

A second example: many people are dissatisfied with Pakistan's judiciary. The courts are in the cities. Proceedings drag on for years, giving rise to recurring costs for legal representation and travel, particularly for the rural population. A protest movement emerged because of that. They were looking for alternatives to state-administered justice, which they regarded as inefficient. They turned to local values or identities – in other words, traditional Muslim law. An organisation called TEHREEK-E-NAFAZ-E-SHARIAT-E-MOHAMMADI (TNSM) emerged. A few hotheads picked an argument with the police; there were casualties. The government quickly labelled TNSM a terrorist organisation and banned it.

Many local groups, associations and interest groups disagree with TNSM's strategy. But they are similarly guided by local values and identities. They share many of the views and have a certain understanding for TNSM's objectives. But the subject is taboo for the donor community; since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, it is essential, after all, to combat fundamentalism.

Missed opportunities

There are still more examples to illustrate that civil society, in the sense of the IDS definition, does indeed exist in the mountain regions of Pakistan, but that the donor community does not recognize it. However, two important conclusions can already be

drawn.
Civil society is alive. A large number of unions, associations and interest groups inhabit the social space between households and the state, even in the remote mountains of Pakistan.
The civil society does not exist. The social space between households and the state does not reflect a homogeneous (and non-political) interpretation of values and interests, which are essential for the local development and identity.

It is not really surprising that different interpretations of local values, local identity and therefore also paths to change and “development” compete with one another. Different ideas on modernity and progress are under discussion. In other words, people in the North-West Frontier Province are also assessing globalisation critically. For example, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the region’s dominant political coalition, has stated: “There is a wide difference between western cultures and Islamic cultures and the NGOs should give priority to the latter. (... help should be extended) to all those welfare bodies who wanted progress of the country and its standing on its own feet.”

Why donors hardly ever involve any of the civil-society entities outlined above in programmes and projects is therefore a salient question. Perhaps the reasons are quite simple. One could be that only very few groups have attractive English names, including the most recent buzzwords of international development discourse. Nor do they have catchy acronyms.

A more complex reason lies in normative notions, which are not normally spelled out explicitly. All donors officially promote popular participation, respect for values and traditions as well as consideration of local interests. But such declarations of intent go along with a sense of insecurity, particularly in Muslim contexts as in Pakistan. Local forms of conflict resolution (jirga) are quickly categorised as archaic and authoritarian. Anyone who argues with the state is simply considered illegal. Groups with an orientation towards Islam are dismissed as being fundamental.

So what remains is a group of teachers with an English name and the idea that proper civil society has yet to be developed – from the outside. One way of doing that is to go on funding local project staff under new titles once regular projects have run their course. Another option is to “endogenize” local branches of international NGOs. Of course, authentic civil-society participation would be something else.

More could probably be achieved if donors actually got involved with local interests and development concepts. To do so, they would have to take a closer look, question their own ideologies, and take the

existing civil society seriously. Donors should examine the heterogeneity of the real civil society and give transparent reasons for selecting certain groups as partners for development (and not others) – and stating clearly what kind of development they have in mind.

Dr. Urs Geiser
is a member of the academic staff in the Department of Geography at the University of Zürich.
urs.geiser@geo.unizh.ch